The Progressive Review

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Bork: Forget politics, the man's too dumb

Much of media and political Washington seems quite ready to cede that Judge Bork is brilliant and possesses a keen intellect. These familiar capital phrases, which enjoyed a brief respite following the Contra investigation appearance of Elliot Abrams, have been used in the past to describe William Rehnquist, Robert MacNamara, Henry Kissinger, and McGeorge Bundy (not to mention a herd of other Harvard professors who used the Vietnam War as a sort of Outward Bound program for academicians).

Politicians are seldom considered brilliant although a few, like Lyndon Johnson, can rise to the lower rank of "brilliant tactician." Brilliance, in Washington terms, usually requires an association with a university (preferably with its law school), reflecting an indigeous inferiority complex that helps explain why politicians accept so much bad advice from scholars. Washington's definition of brilliance and intellect is totally devoid of a ranking system for philosophical depth, ethical analysis, and integration of observable facts with abstract theory. It gives no credit for creativity, moral comprehension, tendencies towards altruism as opposed to those toward greed, capacity for empathy, or the application of one's brains beyond the immediate needs of maintaining oneself and one's class in the style to which they have become accustomed. The Washington concept of brilliance is, in fact, rather close to that of the Educational Testing Service, and suffers from some of the same lack of prescience as does the SAT. Thus it veers markedly from the more holistic vision of intellect suggested by Ralph Emerson in his work on the subject:

"How can we speak of the action of the mind under any divisions, as of its knowlege, of its ethics, of its works, and so forth, since it melts will into perception, knowlege into act? Each becomes the other. Itself alone is."

Ralph would have had a hard time gaining access in today's Washington, what with its neat compartmentalization of knowledge, ethics, works, and will so magnificently outlined for us of late in the sermons of Oliver North. But Emerson's queries are central to the issue of Judge Bork, since stipulating his competency for the job of justice leaves one to oppose his nomination on the somewhat more tenuous grounds of ideology. While the ideological arguments have merit — as the Senate has found on more than a few occasions ever since it first rejected John Rutledge in 1795, it seems masochistic to accept without argument the dubious proposition that a man so consistently wrong, so mean-spirited, and so doggedly servile in his legal opinions to the interests of his

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class, sex and race, is intellectually up to the task.

Senator Kennedy has described the ideological problem:

"Robert Bork's America is a land in which women would be forced into back alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens' doors in midnight raids, schoolchildren could not be taught about evolution, writers and artists could be censored at the whim of government and the doors of the federal courts would be shut on the fingers of millions of children."

Reagan, said Kennedy, "should not be able to reach out from the much of Irangate, reach into the muck of Wategate and impose his reactionary vision of the Constitution on the Supreme Court and on the next generation of Americans."

And, as Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd suggested early in the debate, if the president can use ideological standards in choosing a nominee, the Senate can use ideological standards in opposing him.

But the Bork issue goes beyond ideology. Bork suffers from an extreme case of what Archibald MacLeish once called "that peculiar disease of intellectuals, that infatuation with ideas at the expense of experience, that compels experience to conform to bookish preconceptions." Bork seems to have proceeded through life like a doctoral student defending his thesis, constantly trying to make life fit his theories, sublimely indifferent to the possibility that the fluidity of the former may make a mockery of the latter.

As we celebrate the constitutional bicentennial, we have been treated to innumerable examples of what now seems the limited perspective of those we were taught to revere as founding fathers. We find their attitudes towards blacks, women and the non-propertied of America repugnant by our standards. Their alibi is that they have been dead for nearly two hundred years. Robert Bork has no such excuse. Yet he is reminiscent of the early 19th century theology professor at Princeton who boasted that in fifty years of teaching he had never broached a new idea. When he has proposed a decision adversely affecting blacks, women, homosexuals, prisoners or the rights of ordinary citizens, he is not speaking as a victim of his century or his culture. He is speaking not only against a contemporary political view but against a consensus painfully formed by our people over a long period. He proposes not a new ideology but a return to an ancient regime, one that favored the white, the male, the rich and the hyper-educated. His enemy is not the liberals but history itself. There is in this little that is brilliant or indicative of a keen intellect. It is, in fact, more suggestive of the rigidity of a petrified mind.

It is true that Bork's politics are wrong. It is true that there is grave reason to doubt whether he could honestly swear to serve all the people of the United States. But beyond that the man appears to suffer from a form of intellectual dyslexia. His brain seems incapable of absorbing new experience, of perceiving beyond self-interest or of empathy with those whose lives differ markedly from his own. Far from brilliance, these handicaps suggest that the man is, in fact, sort of dumb. And that is reason enough to reject him.

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Psalm of the Fast Lane

The Lord is my mentor; I shall want it all.

He feedeth me in world-class restaurants and leadeth me beside the sparkling mineral waters.

He restoreth my house and bringeth me in the path of good access.

Yea, though I jog through the valley of the shadow of high rises I shall fear no viable competition; thy clout and thy bottom line shall comfort me.

He shall prepare a game plan against mine enemies, and shall bloweth dry my head and my Volvo shall runneth over to Bloomingdales.

Surely perks and power lunches shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in an upscale neighborhood forever and ever.

For thine is the power and the glory — But not for long, sucker. I'm right behind you.

—Sam Smith
(c) Progressive Review

What if Jesse were white?

The fact that Jesse Jackson has been leading in the Democratic polls is one of those situations that tries the patience of the media. There is no worse crisis to the journalistic mind than a stereotype run amuck. Thus there has been an extraordinary amount of explanation, qualification and justification for the appearance of Jackson ahead of such jewels of the Democratic party as Biden, Babbitt and Gephardt. Some polltakers have even gone so far as to reinsert Mario Cuomo's name in their list to make sure a white son of the Republic comes out on top.

Jackson's relative popularity rests on two factors. The first is that he is a charismatic and eloquent candidate. The second is that not one of his current opponents is. Despite the best efforts of the columnoids to inject some life into the Democratic contest, the white division of the Democratic league has all the excitement of inventory day at a hardware store.

What is interesting is that this time Jackson is running as much more than a black candidate. In fact, Jackson is running as the most progressive presidential candidate of a major party since Henry Wallace. This should be news, just as the warm reception given to Jackson in the midwest and conservative Lexington, Kentucky, should be news, but it isn't for the simple and almost exclusive reason that Jackson is black.

There is a story going the rounds that Jackson and Biden shared a platform in Iowa. Jackson's populist rhetoric was cheered and applauded; while Biden's speech of '60s liberal idealism, filled with quotes from Martin Luther King and the rights of the oppressed, fell flat. Afterwards, Jackson put his arm on Biden's shoulder and said, "Joe, you should have asked me. That civil rights crap just doesn't go anymore."

True or not, the tale does reflect Jackson's transition since 1984 from being an ethnic favorite son to being the first black crossover candidate. This time, Jackson is really trying to get white votes.

The media has downplayed this not necessarily out of ethnic bias, but because it has type-cast Jackson as it type-casts all politicians. Jackson's job is to be the black candidate.

But imagine for a moment that Jackson was white. The story would be quite different. Imagine a white populist, at odds with many of the policies of mainstream Republicans and Democrats, standing up and saying to thunderous applause, as Jackson did in Lexington, "I went to the Mideast and got Navy flier Robert Goodman out and didn't leave any arms. I went to Cuba and brought back hostages and took Castro to church for the first time in 30 years." Imagine this white populist threatening the whole structure of the

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corporate Democratic Party by pulling better in the polls than the prides of Paul Kirk, Nathan Landow and Charles Robb. Would we hear more about Jackson then?

Of course. Just change Jackson's color and the populist ghosts of William Jennings Bryan, the Long brothers, Henry Wallace and George Wallace would arise again to haunt and excite the electorate and the media. He would be the major political story of the year. We would have, among other things, a real campaign.

It would not necessarily mean that Jackson would win. His color is protective as well as an obstacle. A white candidate like Jackson would not be immune to the same personal scrutiny as Hart got. The policies and accounts of PUSH would be gone over in detail. And the questions that have been asked of other charismatic political figures — what does he believe and how long will he believe it?— would be put to Jackson as well. As one non-Jackson supporter put it in '84: "I remember Jesse before he became a virgin."

But at least Jackson would be treated with less condescension; his views would get more attention than his color; and the voters would discover that there still are a few choices left in politics.

Kirk, Landow, Robb and the rest of the Democratic Party's National Security Council can be grateful that Jesse Jackson is not white. For if he were, the Democratic Party might be on the verge of real change. And that would be bad for their business.

Pat vs. "the guys"

While Jackson can probably be contained, there is at least one other political loose cannon rolling around the decks of the Democratic Party. Pat Schroeder is out trying to raise the funds to make a serious try for the presidency. If she succeeds, the campaign may spring to life. Not only would Schroeder be an appealing and interesting candidate, she could fly under the radar of conventional national campaigns, using organizational techniques that haven't been seen since the McGovern effort. Not only would she benefit from the fact that women will outnumber men by the millions in the 1988 election, but she could be aided enormously by the latent organizational power of women. One of the striking characteristics of American culture is that while the men control the corporations and the conventional politics, women dominate many of the community institutions of the country. From PTAs and churches to a wide variety of other community activities, women already have an immense campaign organization in waiting that would not need the ministry of Pat Cadell or others of his ilk. This is as true in hispanic and black culture as it is in white, and in rural as well as urban America. Women invented the phonebank, the organizing network, and have become experts in grassroots politics, in part because they have not been given much other choice. They have at their disposal a sleeping giant that could provide a serious challenge to the media-dominated, corporate-controlled, top-down politics pursued by most male politicians. Whether Schroeder can awake this giant remains to be seen, but the potential is there.

Schroeder would differ from her competition in other respects. For example, she speaks plain English rather than politwaddle. Schroeder, who invented the phrase, "teflon presidency," had this to say to Jim Ridgeway of the Village Voice when he asked her about the Iran-Contra hearings:

> Oh God! I think that's part of what drove me to run. Before I grew up, I'd say to my mother, the other kids do it. She'd say, too bad. You don't. So now these guys say, other countries do it. I say too bad. That's not America. They don't seem to care. I see all these guys who by night are out lighting firecrackers for the 200th anniversary of the Constitution, and by day are thumbing their noses at it. And the only time they care about the Constitution is when they can use it to shield themselves from any kind of pain from having trampled all over it ... These are the guys who want to test everyone in the federal government. One week it's polygraphs.

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Another week it's drugs. The next week it's AIDS. I chair Civil Service and no one has ever told me there's a problem with the civil service, with drug use, AIDS, anything. I want to test them on the Constitution.

That she's as qualified as anyone currently in the race is beyond doubt. She has an impressive progressive record, is a backer of a nuclear test ban and a strong supporter of environmental action, would get us out of El Salvador and Nicaragua and would take our flags off the Kuwaiti tankers ("I think it's insane. We put up our blood for their oil. Our cash for their free trade. We have all the burdens of empire and none of the benefits.") Says Ann Lewis, formerly director of ADA: "Schroeder's passed more legislation than Joe Biden. She's been in Congress longer than Gephardt. She's got more personal connections in Iowa than any of them. I could add that she's got a better haircut than Al Gore, but that would sound tacky." And besides, she can make one promise that no Democratic candidate other than Jackson can offer: "I promise not to be boring."

(Addresses for the Schroeder campaign: Schroeder 1988?, 2000 Gaylord, Denver Colo 80205, or Rick Parsons c/o Schroeder 1988?, 1215 17th St NW, DC 20036 (202:887-0353)

The heart of the issue

[A recent fund-raising letter from Ira Glasser of the ACLU Foundation states the underlying issue of the Iran/Contra scandal well. Here are excerpts]:

The hearings have revealed that a renegade band of zealous colonels, admirals, entrepreneurs and secretaries, encouraged by people in high places, were able to organize private arms and conduct a secret war...

It is time to confront the truth: the fault doe not just lie with Colonel North and Poindexter. Nor does it lie only with those senior executive branch officials who encouraged them.

It is time to point the finger at Congress. It is time to recognize that since the end of World War II, Congress has gradually abdicated its constitutional responsibility as the sole authority to initiate war...

It is naive and dangerous to believe that once this administration leaves office the problem will solve itself. History has proven otherwise — again and again...

The founders of this country knew that the power to initiate war should not be entrusted to a single person. That's why they gave the responsibility to Congress. And only Congress.

This was meant to insure that the nation would not be committed to war without public debate and widespread democratic consensus.

For 156 years the constitutional system worked pretty well. But after World War II, Congress began to give up its authority. Under the sustained pressure of the Cold War, Congress gadually allowed the White House and secret agencies like the CIA to initiate war, and to lie to the American public about what was going on until it was too late...

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Major factual metaphysical discovery cannot get through because it sounds too impossible. Roger Henry, 2252 Westchster Ave., Bronx, NY 10462.

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In the fifties, the CIA secretly overthrew Mossadegh in Iran and installed the Shah. Congress didn't know about it or authorize it. Neither did the American people...

In the sixties, the CIA planned and executed the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Congress didn't know about it or authorize it. Neither did the American people. Even UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson was lied to by his own government.

The examples are endless: Vietnam, Guatemala, Chile, the bombing of Cambodia, Grenada, and now the Iran/Contra mess. And in each case, there had to be lies and cover-ups, the auppression of dissent, wiretapping of dissidents, enemies lists and more.

After the Vietnam War, Congress made a half-hearted attempt to take back its constitutional power, through the War Powers Act. But that law was left purposely vague and ambiguous, inviting presidents to avoid its restrictions and go right on initiating secret wars.

The Iran/Contra scandal therefore reflects a more systemic and fundamental constitutional problem. The balance of democratic power has been turned on its head. In effect, Congress has accepted the view that the modern world is too dangerous for democracy.

[The ACLU Fund has started a campaign to have Congress reassert its exclusive power under the Constitution to declare war, to outlaw covert military action, and to make such actions an issue in the 1988 campaign. Contributions can be sent to the fund at 132 West 43rd St., NYC NY 10036]

[]

Almost three-fourths of employed mothers in the US pay for child care — with their average weekly costs of $40 adding up to as much as $11.1 billion a year. The Census Bureau reports that 7.7 million employed mothers used day care last year.

[]

Happy birthday to Her Say, a women's news service that, for the past ten years, has been a major source of information about women. Her Say was the first media organization in the US to uncover and publish the link between tampons and the potentially fatal toxic shock syndrome, not to mention some 5700 other stories.

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in a final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed -- those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone -- it is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hope of its children -- Dwight Eisenhower, 1953

JUST POLITICS

[]

Michel Dukakis has opposed the use of state national guard troops in Hondoras. On the other hand, he has supported the expansion of Otis Air Force Base and the local training of Green Berets on the ground that the troops may be needed to "support Aquino." Dukakis also helped lead the effort to make Boston the home port for the battleship Iowa task force. Robert Kiley, an ex-CIA official, who ran against Dukakis, called this the "equivalent of basing 33 MX missiles in Boston harbor."

[]

A new factor in politics is the growing strength of hispanic voters. PNS reports that hispanics are the country's fastest growing group in both population and voter registration. Says Willie Velesquez of the Southwest Voter Registration Project: "Hispanics constitute 13% of the new registered vote." A poll taken at a convention of the League of United Latin American Citizens gave Babbitt and Dukakis 24%, Jackson 17%, and Simon 12%.

[]

One of the party's potential draft choices, William Bradley, was recently roasted at a Washington affair. Said Michael Dukakis, "Bill is to charisma what Joan Rivers is to silent meditation." Bruce Babbitt said that Bradley can give "a fireside chat and the fire goes out." Look who's talking.

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[]
Greens won 13 seats in the Italian parliament in June. This is the first time Greens have broken into the national legislature.

[]
Sam Nunn is a favorite among national media types and the crypto-Republican wing of the Democratic Party. A recent article by Nadine Cohades in the Washington Post suggests why the latter like him so much:

- In 1975 Nunn was one of only 13 senators to vote against bringing up legislation to renew the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Although he eventually voted for it, he supported many weakening amendments. Again in 1982, he boosted several amendments to weaken the measure.
- In 1980 Nunn voted against most of his party in supporting a filibuster that killed legislation that would have given the Department of Housing & Urban Development new powers to fight housing discrimination.
- In 1982, Nunn suported Jesse Helms's efforts to allow states to pass laws that would permit prayers in public school or restrict access to abortions.
- In 1983, Nunn voted for a constitutional amendment that would make abortion illegal.

Writes Cohodas: "From 1981 to 1986, Nunn was among the Senate Democrats who supported Reagan most often... Sam Nunn may seem like an attractive national candidate, but only until Democrats really get to know him."

[]
Not everyone thought Gary Hart should have dropped out. David Garth, who helped John Lindsay get re-elected by saying "I've made mistakes," thinks Hart should have followed suit. Garth also suggested to Michael Kramer of US News & World Report, "How's this for a media campaign: Four equal-sized photographs of Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Hart under the slogan 'In a Great Tradition?'"

THE ENTROPY BEAT

The telephone weather forecast in Washington recently promised "participation" in the afternoon. The forecast added that the "participation may be accomplished by high winds."

WEATHER REPORT

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One of America's conceits is that a military takeover could never happen here. Yet, watching the Iran/Contra testimony of Oliver North, the thought occurred that, if this conceit proved wrong, this is how it would begin. And it would end, not with tanks rolling down Pennsylvania Avenue but voluntarily and in the name of god and country, transferring our trust from ourselves to one bedecked with ribbons, speaking of sacred honor — perhaps even with a boyish grin and and a Jimmy Stewart-like crack in his voice.

[]
According to Harper's, the Reagan administration has distributed 2.6 trillion condoms worldwide since 1981. There are some things we should be glad the Great Prevaricator doesn't know.

[]
August 5th and August 8th will be the 42nd anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Events are planned around the country on these days. Those in the Washington area can contact the Hiroshima/Nagasaki Peace Committee by calling Louise Franklin-Ramirez or John Steinbach c/o the Gray Panthers (347-9541 or 221-1523).

[]
Speaking at a graduation ceremony recently, Texas agriculture commissioner Jim Hightower offered these statistics on the American economy:

- Fifteen years ago, the richest one percent of the American families held 27% of the nation's wealth; today they are approaching likely to surpass the 36% peak-share attained in 1929.
- For the poorest 20% of American families, their annual incomes (in real dollars) are one-third less than they were 15 years ago.
- Nearly half of the new jobs created in the US economy from 1979 to 1985 pay less than a poverty-level income: $180 a week.
- Mergers, leverage buyouts and

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takeovers soaked up $190 billion in capital last year.

[]
From a letter written by Harry Magdoff, co-editor of the Monthly Review, to the Nation: "What is the advantage of improving methods of production? In the past six years improvement in production methods, including speed-ups, resulted in the loss of one million jobs and a 20% increase in output. How would further improvement in these methods create more jobs, unless production increased even more rapidly than productivity?"

[]
Recon Network reports that Cornell University contacted 663 members of the National Academy of Sciences for their opinions on Star Wars. With two-thirds responding, only ten percent said they support it. Another 11% said they were neutral. The rest opposed the project.

[]
The Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation estimates that 18 million Americans will be homeless or nearly homeless within 16 years. The number of poor households is predicted to increase 44%.

[]
The Campaign for Nuclear Free America is calling for a boycott against long-distance telephone companies involved in the production of nuclear weapons. Only MCI and Western Union are not profiting directly from the research, production or testing of nuclear weapons.

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